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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000089

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/14/2032
TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PHUM, KIRF, CU, VT
SUBJECT: DAS MADISON ENGAGES VATICAN ON CUBA

REF: A. A. STATE 57510

B. B. PARMLY - FRIEDMAN 4/30 EMAIL

VATICAN 00000089 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Political Officer, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) WHA DAS Kirsten Madison described the worsening human rights situation in Cuba to the new XXXXXXXXXXXX, and appealed to the Vatican on the issue of the Catholic magazine Vitral. XXXXXXXXXXXX repeated general Vatican support for Vitral

and promised to look into the matter further. Monsignor XXXXXXXXXXXX, told Madison that Cardinal Ortega had likely pressured local Bishop Serpa to shut the magazine down, apparently motivated by some personal feelings about the leadership of the magazine. XXXXXXXXXXXX was not wholly convinced that the Spanish could have done more during the Moratinos visit, though he did not dispute the negative effects the visit had upon dissidents. XXXXXXXXXXXX suggested that some concession on restrictions such as family travel to Cuba could be useful for advancing U.S. interests generally. DAS Madison's visit was useful in accessing XXXXXXXXXXXX's goldmine of information on the Church in Cuba, and helping to shape the views of XXXXXXXXXXXX, still learning the intricacies of Cuba issues. End Summary

Vitral

2. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX, still getting up to speed on his substantial portfolio (including Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia and Brazil), stuck to the official line on Vitral, saying that as far as he knew the magazine had been "suspended" for financial reasons. He repeated what Post has reported before: the Vatican was not behind the closure of Vitral. XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX (please protect throughout) both expressed concern that this important voice be silenced. However, XXXXXXXXXXXX repeated his contention that the Holy See would be very hesitant to interfere in a bishop's diocese on an issue like this

3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX, who served in Havana and previously covered Cuba in the Secretariat of State, seemed to be more in the know on the issue. He said that the government had been trying to close Vitral for years, but was afraid of the potential backlash. When the local bishop (Siro) retired, Cardinal Ortega pressured new Bishop Serpa to shut it down, apparently motivated by some animosity towards the leadership of the magazine. In any case, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, the government must be happy because the Church did its dirty work for it. [Note: Vatican officials have hinted in the past that Ortega had become too cozy with Castro.]

4. (S) Madison stressed the concern about the closure she had already heard from governments and non-governmental organizations during her trip, and XXXXXXXXXXXX was sympathetic. We suggested that if the Vatican shared our interest in Vitral continuing publication, they might arrange for Bishop Serpa to receive a grant from Caritas or another Vatican-related aid

organization (ref a). In this way the Holy See could signal its interest in an understated way, sending a message, but offering the bishop a face-saving way to backtrack on his decision. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said that the issue would be at the top of his agenda as soon as the pope's trip to Brazil was out of the way; it was currently consuming the Secretariat of State. [Note: We have not heard confirmation that Serpa is coming to Rome (ref b), though some Cuban prelates are apparently coming later this month for a meeting at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.]

Human Rights

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5. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX was surprised to hear Madison's description of the worsening human rights situation in Cuba, but did not dispute it, simply seeking details. [Note: Post has a follow-up appointment with him this week at which we will pass further points supplied by WHA.] XXXXXXXXXXXXX was not as surprised, recounting three recent incidents of harassment of Catholic clergy at the airport.

Moratinos

6. (C) Madison noted that Cuba's democratic opposition was feeling vulnerable in the aftermath of the recent visit of Spanish FM Moratinos to Cuba. XXXXXXXXXXXXX repeated his contentions that the Spanish offer to meet at a lower level with dissidents following Moratinos' departure was significant, and that it would have been difficult diplomatically for the Spanish to have done otherwise. Madison emphasized the deflating effects the decision had had on dissidents, who look to Europe for support in their struggle for human rights. The fact that some activists had put aside their considerable differences to sign the Unity for Freedom statement showed how vulnerable the Spanish had left them feeling and demonstrated a degree of strategic thinking that was a new phenomenon.

Embargo, Restrictions

7. (C) The Holy See's view on the embargo is well known and neither interlocutor dwelled on it. But XXXXXXXXXXXXX said that some concession on restrictions such as family travel could be useful for advancing U.S. interests generally. He suggested that a gesture like that could perhaps win over support from the Europeans on other Cuba issues.

Comment

8. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX offered a goldmine of information on the Church in Cuba; a visit with him is well worth the time for our top officials following Cuba. He told us that Bertone was engaged on these issues. Madison's visit was also very helpful in orienting XXXXXXXXXXXXX on U.S. policy. He is not yet a Cuba expert, but is a sharp diplomat and will quickly get up to speed on his countries when the dust clears from the papal visit to Brazil. We will continue to engage XXXXXXXXXXXXX, as we hope he will become the helpful advocate on Cuba and Venezuela that XXXXXXXXXXXXX was in his position.
ROONEY

=====CABLE ENDS=====